

Davies Papers

The Davies Forum Series
2011-2012: No.2

*'Red or White?
Why I Wear a Remembrance Poppy'*



David Davies Memorial Institute
of International Studies

The Davies Papers aim to be an accessible outlet for work for academic articles, as well as work which does not easily fit into traditional publishing formats. The Davies Papers, which will be available only on the DDMI website, are organised into several distinct series: planned so far is the Davies Forum Series, an Africa Series, and a Nuclear Series. A particular Paper might be a finished paper, work in progress, a presentation, an annotated bibliography etc. Researchers interested in submitting proposals should contact Grant Dawson at gsd@aber.ac.uk.

The Davies Forum Series focuses on current issues in international politics. The actual Forums on which the Papers are based are open to the public, but are particularly geared towards students; the meetings seek to help students relate their studies to recent world events and encourage critical thinking and debate. The Forum Series publishes the opening remarks of the speakers, whose brief is to give a ten-minute presentation providing 'behind the headlines' background material, or advancing a distinct argument.

This number in the Forum series takes up the Red Poppy / White Poppy debate. The Red Poppy is a symbol of remembrance all over the world. Its origins as a symbol can be traced to the First World War (1914-18) when John McCrae, a colonel and medical doctor with the Canadian contingent, wrote the moving poem "In Flanders Fields" depicting the red poppy as a flower of remembrance. In the years that followed, people began to regard the Red Poppy as an appropriate emblem to honour those who had fought and died in war. Red Poppies are typically worn to mark Remembrance Day / Armistice Day on 11 November. Poppy wreaths are commonly placed on war memorials on that day.

The White Poppy was first produced in 1933. Although less common than the Red Poppy, the White Poppy is worn by people around the world as an international symbol of remembrance and peace, and as a challenge to the drive to war. White Poppies can be worn as an alternative or complement to Red Poppies to express a political standpoint. Some wearers argue that the Red Poppy is linked to the militaristic aspects of remembrance, patriotism and nationalism, and that the White Poppy is the emblem for all casualties of war – civilian and military – and the cause of peace. Some also complain that pressure to wear Red Poppies borders on the coercive.

The Davies Papers / Forum Series No. 2 publishes remarks that were made at the Forum held on 11 November 2011. The Davies Forum speakers – Dr Jeff Bridoux and Professors Ken Booth and Richard Jackson – were invited to address the question: 'Red or White? Why I Wear a Remembrance Poppy.'

The presentations below in the order in which the contributors spoke:

'Red or White? Why I Wear a Remembrance Poppy'

KEN BOOTH

The wearing or not wearing of a poppy every November is a complex mix of public and private thoughts and emotions. Before turning to the public debate, I want therefore to start with a personal story.

Tomorrow is the funeral of Olwen Davies, who died recently at the age of 87. Olwen was a famous peace campaigner in Wales, and beyond. She was a colourful character who lived a full and interesting life. Among the international campaigns she was best known for were the abolition of nuclear weapons and the bringing to an end of apartheid. Locally, she was very prominent in supporting the children of Chernobyl. Of all her other activities, music was the most cherished: she had trained as an opera singer in Italy after the Second World War.

Olwen and I had known each other a long time, and we shared a number of common positions on political issues. In 2003 we were on the biggest peace march in British history, against the coming war on Iraq; and we agreed on scrapping Trident. But we also had disagreements, and poppies were one of them. It is difficult to describe how worked up people can get over the red/white poppy issue, including people who agree on many other matters.

Olwen was a belligerent supporter of the white poppy. For her the red poppy represented the culture of war -militarism, the arms industry, the waste of lives, and the belief that war solves political problems. I used to argue – rather weakly because it annoyed her - that we should reframe the discussion. I argued that she should respect the position of the British Legion and sympathise with its supporters who pushed the wearing of the red poppy; I said that those who supported the ideas represented by the red poppy should be left alone to mark Remembrance Day as they did. Above all, there should not be a fight over the colour of the poppy because, red or white, the joint concern is with lost lives in the scourge of war. This disagreement between us became one of those topics best not talked about. It becomes personal. But of course it also goes beyond the personal.

As November approaches each year there are five positions one can hold on the red/white poppy issue. One can:

- support the British Legion and wear a red poppy;
- support the Peace Pledge Union and wear a white poppy;
- wear both poppies at the same time;
- reject both positions and do not wear any poppy; or
- do not wear either poppy, but support both groups.

My position is the last one.

I support both red and white in the sense that I give money to the causes they represent.

I am a member of the Movement to Abolish War (MAW), though I am not a pacifist. I share MAW's aim of trying to construct a culture of peace such that humans progressively learn to delegitimize violence in their political arrangements, and so transcend the disgusting institution of war. Not surprisingly, MAW is a prominent supporter of the white poppy.

At the same time, I also put money in collecting boxes for the British Legion. At this point in world history states still need soldiers, and that being the case certain things follow – such as looking after them and their families after combat. The British Legion is called upon to do a good job because the state does such a bad one. States behave badly in many ways – and amongst their worst behaviour is the way they renege on servicemen and women and their families by not always giving them the support they need. Whether it is war widow's pensions, campaign medals, long-term medical care, and so on, successive British governments – despite all the pro-forces propaganda they spew out – have traditionally behaved badly towards those who have risked all.

If I support both, why don't I - won't I - wear a poppy every November? Surely the logical position from what I have just said is to wear both, as a few people do.

The main reason I reject this position is that I dislike all badges of identity, and especially those of political significance. I would abolish national flags if I could. (On a relatively trivial level, it will be a moment of hope in the civilising process of humanity when the winners of gold medals at the Olympics are left to enjoy their moment without all the nationalist paraphernalia of anthems being played and flags being so-solemnly raised.) I don't like the way tribes, whether ethnic, political, or religious, flaunt their symbols to parade their difference. I don't like people beginning sentences rooted in identity politics ('Speaking as a*****' – fill in the blank); I want people to think as rational human beings, not as representatives of identities. One of the challenges facing global society these days is thinking through and beyond the identities that history and geography have imposed on all of us. We need to drop the badges and dare to think.

As each November comes I don't like red poppy ideologues telling me how to remember war, and I don't like white poppy ideologues telling me what to think about soldiers who risked their lives. Both sides need to back off. This is an unnecessary and unhelpful confrontation. I don't like being told how to show my thoughts and feelings about such important matters as war and its aftermath, and a poppy of whatever colour does not begin to represent all that is involved in war and the pity of war.

RICHARD JACKSON

It is a fact that the vast majority of people who wear a poppy at this time of year, wear the red poppy. It is ubiquitous in the public sphere, from sporting events to television news and public ceremonies. Many millions of red poppies are sold and worn every year, while white poppies number in the few thousands. I wear the white poppy for two main sets of reasons. First, because I am uncomfortable with what the red poppy has come to symbolise, and the role it plays in broader structures of militarism and war. It seems to me to be a deeply ambiguous symbol today which has travelled far from its original purpose. Second, because I believe that the while poppy has a more peaceful and inclusive symbolism. In this sense, it is much more unambiguously symbol of opposition to war and militarism and remembrance for all the victims of war.

In my view, the red poppy has become an exclusive symbol of remembrance which celebrates those who fight, rather than all the victims of war. This is problematic, because by excluding the non-military victims of war from remembrance, the red poppy functions to uphold a moral hierarchy of worthy and unworthy victims: the heroic soldier who is worthy of respect and official commemoration, and the unworthy, unnamed civilians killed or maimed who thus remain officially unacknowledged and unremembered. This validation of those who wage war and the moral hierarchy of victims is, I believe, a central part of the cultural architecture which upholds the continuing institution of war in our world. It is a central part of what makes war possible. I believe we need a symbol which involves an honest public acknowledgement of all the people killed in war – our soldiers, enemy soldiers and civilians alike. We need a symbol which symbolizes our sorrow and regret for all the victims of war, not just a chosen few.

I am also uncomfortable about the way the red poppy functions to hide the truth and obscure reality – how it enforces a particular kind of collective memory which is actually designed to forget uncomfortable realities, and how it is tied up with a whole series of myths about heroic sacrifice and necessary violence in war. The truth is that war is cruel, bloody, and inglorious, and that the soldiers we remember at this time are there to kill and maim fellow human beings, and to die screaming for their mothers. The truth is that when we send soldiers to kill others, we consign those who survive to mental and moral injury; a huge proportion of them will attempt suicide in one way or another after they return home, or suffer mental anguish. The truth is that many of our wars are nothing to do with freedom, liberty, or democracy; they are often illegal, pointless, or predatory. We need a symbol which is associated with an honest debate on the reality and morality of our wars, and which acknowledges the truth about the horror of war and its often pointless slaughter of our best and brightest. The white poppy can symbolise this, but not the red one.

I am also concerned that the fund-raising and symbolism at the centre of the red poppy appeal actually does not have at its heart the true interests of the military personnel it purports to support. I believe that the best interests of every military person would be to never have to kill or face death or mutilation ever again, and certainly not for the squalid purposes most frequently dreamed up by our venal and vainglorious politicians. The funds raised by the sale of the poppy should be used to work for the end of all war, not to make up for the short-coming in state support for military personnel or to prepare the nation for further slaughter in future wars. In other words, I think that the red poppy appeal allows the state to offset the costs of war so that it can engage in ever more military adventures. The state sends the nation's young

people to war and then refuses to spend the necessary money on supporting them when they return home. Buying a red poppy is in effect a second tax for funding war, as it allows the state to spend the money it should have spent on rehabilitation on buying new weapons and training new soldiers. In my view, instead of buying a red poppy, we should all demand that the state pay the full support and rehabilitation of all soldiers who need it out of the taxes we have already paid to the military. If this means that there is not enough money for the next military adventure because we are taking care of the last war's victims, then all to the better.

I am also uncomfortable with the way that the red poppy is sometimes used to enforce an unthinking patriotism, and to punish and discipline those who would question the morality of war or the values of militarism. Those who fervently promote the red poppy often assert that the soldiers we remember fought for our freedom, but sometimes it seems as if this does not include the freedom to question military values or public displays of violent patriotism. I believe that anyone should be allowed to refuse to wear a red poppy in public on the basis of conscience without being questioned or looked down upon, or even to wear a different coloured poppy.

I am also concerned with the way in which the cult of the red poppy forms a central part of a broader militarism in our society which makes war more likely, rather than less likely. It seems to be directly bound up with national narratives of heroism and the legitimacy and the rightness of military force as an element of national power. It seems to be implicitly supportive of military values. This means that the red poppy is not a neutral and unifying symbol, but a deeply political and highly charged symbol of nationalism.

In the end, I wear the white poppy because it grew out of a genuine desire to save future generations from the horrors of war and to find nonviolent ways of resolving conflict. It is an unambiguous commitment to peace, the end of all war and opposition to militarism. The red poppy may have once been part of a commemorative culture shortly after the First World War that was aimed at working towards ensuring that no one ever had to experience the horrors of war again, but this meaning has long since vanished, replaced instead by an insidious military patriotism. The white poppy has therefore become by default the primary symbol of a commitment to remember all the victims of war, to tell the truth about war, to work to ensure that no soldier ever has to suffer its horrors again, and to make peace the central value of our culture, instead of war and militarism. This is why I wear it.

JEFF BRIDOUX

To start with, I believe that the way each of us decides to remember victims of wars is a very personal decision. In this country, Remembrance Day is a widespread tradition, almost a social phenomenon, which, to a foreigner like me, seems sometimes astonishing. It seems that in UK, Remembrance Day is all about servicemen who lost their lives defending the country. Where I come from, Belgium, we also tend to remember civilians who lost their lives. Having endured two occupations with a resulting string of persecutions, executions and other exactions committed against civilians (members or not of resistance groups), Remembrance Day has little to do with heroics but rather speaks of horrors.

Personally, I don't wear any Poppy, red or white. I don't feel the need to display my convictions but if I were wearing any, I would wear both. Is there a contradiction in wearing a peace symbol next to a symbol remembering ALL those who died at war?

Let me take for a short trip through personal experiences that have conditioned my position on Remembrance Day.

Firstly, I must mention my family history. I do not see heroics in war. I grew up listening to stories about how my great-grandfather during The Great War and my grandfather during the Second World War went to war and remained permanently scarred by what they experienced. Under the occupation, war stories turned into survival stories. Not the kind of survival stories Hollywood makes movies of though but rather stories about having enough food, or ironically, surviving a train trip being strafed by allied fighter-bombers. Yet, even though war was clearly despised because it enslaved them, my forebears also understood that war liberated them. They had the utmost respect for allied soldiers who risked their life liberating Belgium. So do I.

Secondly, there is my own experience in the military. I spent ten months doing my military service in what was then called a 'combat unit'. That meant that in case Warsaw Pact would attack NATO, we were amongst the first units to be engaged. That translated into more intensive training, including of course, weapon handling. I remember this period of my life for two reasons: I noticed that the army was a social melting pot, with the less socio-economic favoured strata of the population constituting the bulk of servicemen; and, I also notice my growing dislike for firearms. Passed the excitement of using one for the first time, I quickly realised the damages they could cause. To use such a weapon against another human being was beyond me. No need to say that I became rather poor soldier material, which leads me to my third point: my university years political and ideological awakening to socialism and pacifism.

Hence, and thirdly, I firmly believe that invariably, war is a sport for rich men played by poor men. These men and women who put their life in the line of fire are failed three times by society:

- We fail to offer them other opportunities but joining the army. As long as there will be armies, there will be soldiers. There is no doubt that some soldiers join the army by vocation. If anything, the military offer to those who do not have other opportunities a chance to have a job. However, it is rather ironic that capitalism as a system even organises its own defence by making sure that there will be an adequate supply of cannon fodder, the bulk of which is constituted by less favoured socio-economic strata of the population.

- We fail to tell them that health and safety does not apply in their job. War, in popular culture, is more often than not depicted as a 'sport'. War movies are too often about heroics, brotherhood, glory, and so on. Modern video games trivialise war, almost make war fun or 'acceptable'. Popular culture rarely engages with the fact that soldiers can get killed, or maimed, and if they are lucky enough to escape physically intact, there is a good chance that they will be traumatised.
- Most importantly, we fail to support those returning from combat adequately. The state fails to support those who pay the ultimate price for its defence.

This is why I believe that showing support for charities helping those who suffer from war is also important. Charities like The British Legion play a role in compensating for state failure to support veterans adequately. Of course, one can argue that doing so also contributes alleviate budget pressure on the state, which can then divert funds that it should dedicate to those veterans for, potentially, the defence budget. However, what about other charities like cancer research, shall we also stop supporting them because the government clearly does not dedicate enough resources to them?

I don't think that veterans should be put at the centre of a debate on war and peace, and being deprived of additional support on top of what the government offers. It is up to us, as voters, to ask our representatives to put these issues on the table. In the meantime, it is my duty as a humanist to offer any additional help for those returning from a war, and generally for those who suffer from war, servicemen, civilians, friends or foes. If you support the British Legion, you might as well support Handicap International for example. My next duty, as pacifist, consists in denouncing the glorification of war in any form and pressuring the government to limit militarism in our societies and war as a means to solve disputes between states. I will conclude with praise for France and Germany. In 2009, President Sarkozy and Chancellor Merkel declared Remembrance Day the day of Friendship between their two countries. The fallen are still remembered in every single village. But I like the idea that the day that marked the end of such a bloody conflict is now turned into a day of hope and friendship.